



Pedagogy for Sustainable Development: A Feminist Approach

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Education for Sustainable Development: Graduates as Global Citizens 2007

Discussion: **'Pedagogy for sustainable development: a feminist approach'**

Theme: Developing the knowledge, skills and values appropriate for global sustainability.

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Introduction

Education for sustainable development needs to employ a coherent approach to teaching, learning and assessment that offers relevant course content in such a way that encourages and supports students to develop the ethical awareness, values, attitudes, skills and behaviour consistent with sustainable development. This paper discusses the contribution of a feminist pedagogy of advocacy to the achievement of these educational goals by offering an appropriate pedagogical framework and effective methods for teaching, learning and assessment. Where sustainability is understood not only as a scientific, but also as a moral issue dealing with inequalities, wealth, power, and personal and collective responsibility (Cullingford, 2004), a feminist pedagogy of advocacy is appropriate not only for the delivery of gender equality material, but for any course that approaches sustainable development as inextricably linked to social justice (Warren, 2004).

This paper offers an evidence-based educational case study drawing on a pedagogical research project which is currently being conducted in Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester. The paper discusses preliminary findings regarding the effectiveness of a variety of constructivist learning opportunities and how they are incorporated into institutional assessment strategies. It explores student learning through the use of peer learning, enquiry-based learning, and structured learning journals. The central question is how feminist pedagogy can encourage and support students to experiment with constructivist epistemology in order to foster learning for sustainable development as social justice.

ESD & feminist pedagogies

Before presenting the learning, teaching and assessment strategy used on the 'Religion, Culture and Gender' course in some detail, I want to compare my own feminist pedagogical model to the ESD pedagogy presented in the Higher Education Academy's report 'Sustainable Development in Higher Education: Current Practice and Future Developments' of 2005. The areas of affinities and overlap between the two pedagogical approaches can be summarised as epistemology, harnessing knowledge for social transformation, linking theory and practice, and challenging the roles of teacher as dispenser of information and student as receiver of information. The following table shows these areas in the terminology of the respective pedagogies.

<i>Feminist pedagogy</i> ¹	<i>ESD pedagogy</i> ²
Student reflection on impact of their standpoint on	Critical thinking about nature of, production and

¹ Based on Gustafson (1999), Lelwica (1999), and Maher et al. (2001).

² Based on Dawe et al. (2005).

<i>Feminist pedagogy</i>	<i>ESD pedagogy</i>
their learning & knowledge construction	validation of knowledge
Linking knowledge with experience to evoke change and contribute to students' (and teachers') lives	Learning for action & lifelong learning
Subjecting anecdotal evidence to critical and systematic analysis	Experiential learning: real life problems and actual experiences as learning situations
Challenging hegemonic structures in and beyond the classroom	Empowerment of learner: students as teachers and educators as learners; student ownership of knowledge

The feminist pedagogy list is part of my own toolkit which I developed for my Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. I needed something practical, a 'how to' guide, which the literature does not seem to provide despite a relative wealth of theoretical literature by feminist educators. It is a kind of shorthand or list of essentials distilled out of several works. This list suits my needs as a lecturer with a limited amount of time for pedagogical development. It should not be read as definitive and complete, but as sufficient and relevant to my own practice. The Education for Sustainable Development list was compiled by the same process of reading the Dawe report.

Case study: 'Religion, Culture and Gender'

After a review of the course's learning, teaching and assessment strategy in 2005, the course team agreed on the following assessed learning opportunities. The main criterion was to develop a consciously feminist approach that allowed all tasks to feed into each other. This review has resulted in the following varied methods which have been used once.

Peer Learning	Student-led Discussions
Enquiry-based Learning	Pamphlet
Knowledge-Construction	Learning Journal & Reading Log, Exam
Reflection on Learning	Learning Journal & Reading Log, Self-Assessment of Student-led Discussions

For the purpose of discussing pedagogical methods appropriate for ESD, I am going to analyse in more depth the Student-led Discussions, the Pamphlet and the Learning Journal. After briefly describing each task and the pedagogical aims behind it, I will present some of the achievements and challenges each task produced. The evidence is taken from students' work and the lecturer's written feedback to students.

Student-led Discussions

The Student-led discussions were introduced instead of conventional seminar presentations as a way of giving students more autonomy over their learning. The task was self-assessed by each facilitating student before receiving the lecturer's written comments on the self-assessment. The activity was broken down into three elements. First, a small group of students prepared a short presentation of a course reading suitable for seminars. Then they formulated and presented to the class three questions that they developed out of the reading. The group would then facilitate the discussion of these questions. The pedagogical aim of the task is to challenge hegemonic classroom structures where the lecturer sets the learning agenda by dispensing the right information and by asking the right questions. Instead knowledge should be produced and validated by

peer learning where the whole class takes part in the learning process with only initial interference from the lecturer who set the readings.

There have been three main achievements made by this task. First, students who were otherwise passive in classroom discussions had to take an active role as presenters. In some cases, this revealed very keen and confident engagement with the course content which nobody would have guessed. A review of the course activities at the end of the semester also revealed that students perceived the Student-led Discussions as mainly positive in terms of the contribution to their learning and the stimulation of their own thinking. This was generally the case in both roles as facilitators and class participants. Students also generally enjoyed both roles. This question was important to me within a feminist framework which values emotions as part of the learning experience.

I was rather surprised by students' positive perception of this task as my impression of the activity and also students' self-assessments revealed significant challenges. These concerned working together effectively in small groups, especially where students did not previously know each other, and effective presentation of the readings. Active participation in discussion was a major issue throughout the course, both in lectures and the Student-led Discussions. The following three challenges might go some way to explaining why participation was such a problem: The groups often did not come up with 'good' questions that stimulated discussion, they found it hard to understand their roles as facilitators and how to intervene effectively, and the class as a whole did not manage to establish and adhere to 'ground rules' that made everybody feel valued. The challenge for me was to understand my own role in this process as either an active or a passive participant. Or it might have been useful if I had been a bit of both by facilitating the facilitators.

There were three main problems with the questions that the groups presented for discussion. First, few groups seemed to have a clear idea of what they wanted the class to explore in terms of Bloom's taxonomy of understanding, application, analysis and evaluation of information. It was not generally apparent that students had planned where their questions should lead the discussion and what participants should be able to take away as learning. It seems that most groups did not plan a learning opportunity that helped the exploration of theories and ideas. They rather provided a forum for the venting of personal opinions. This was reflected in typical questions starting with the phrase 'Should men and women have equal...?' In most cases, students were either not comfortable to voice their opinions or they could not be bothered to get involved. The three weeks that saw the liveliest discussions had topics with strong links to real life situations that must have struck a special cord with students, namely transgenering, muslim women's veil, and the Barbie doll. Most discussion contributions were ignoring the questions. The Barbie discussion turned into anarchic confession that left the male students very bemused. In other words, it was not the questions that were more stimulating in those weeks, but the topics themselves. Finally, questions often covered the same ground as previous discussions. Students were unwilling to go there again, even if their thinking might have moved on. Sharing this with the class could have stimulated new collective insights. Unfortunately, unwillingness to engage made for many awkward silences and led the facilitators to despair. Most of them were unprepared for this problem even in later weeks when it had already been discussed in class, albeit with no suggested solutions.

Effective facilitation was a problem in another way when discussion actually happened but became heated in response to emotive questions. In her self-assessment, 'Anna' describes her group's facilitation as follows: "We responded calmly and analysed each discussion entry so that people's meanings were made clear to the group." However, I saw it rather differently from the perspective of the floor: "Although it seemed to you that your group responded calmly, it did not always come across that way when a contribution was clearly offering a controversial position. Your group seemed to get drawn in rather than staying detached as facilitators."

This leads to the final problem which was the lack of agreement on ground rules and participants' unconstructive behaviour in discussions. This is exemplified by 'Susan's perception of a colleague's response to her group's efforts at facilitation: "However, I did not expect, at University level, particularly not in this Department, to be mocked by a member of the class. 'Ellen' and I both saw this person laughing and looking at us as though we were a joke, but we just carried on politely not to make a fuss. It was very upsetting and disappointing though."

Pamphlet

The pamphlet was introduced instead of the conventional essay to give students the opportunity to research a current issue of their own interest that was not already covered by the course materials. In previous years, the course team have always been asked why a certain topic was not included in the course; the pamphlet was seen as a way of dealing with the interests of a varied student body in an innovative way. The pamphlet was summatively assessed by the lecturer at the end of the semester and the mark contributed 20% to the overall mark for students' portfolios which also contained the Learning Journal, the Reading Log and several short questionnaires. The pamphlet was designed as an enquiry-based learning task but not as group work, which is the usual format for enquiry-based learning. This was due to time constraints during the preparatory phase, but the course team are making a gradual transition to a group work framework in order to exploit all the benefits of enquiry-based learning. The problems of group cohesion that were apparent with this cohort highlight the need for sufficient support for the students and the lecturer in facilitating group work.

The pamphlet was meant to provide a source of information for professionals who engage with the public on current issues of religion, culture and gender. An example would be a church official who has to communicate with church members on the archbishop's attitude towards homosexual clergy. The pamphlet should start with the description and discussion of anecdotal evidence taken for example from a newspaper article. It should engage with common prejudices and assumptions by linking them to academic debates and theories introduced on the course in a balanced manner. To provide specific value as a source of information, students were asked to compile a glossary of key terms and concepts, and an annotated bibliography for further reading. The pedagogical aims of the task were first to empower learners by giving them the opportunity to research an issue of their own choice. Secondly, the task developed students' engagement with real life problems as learning situations. They had already been practicing this on a weekly basis in their Learning Journals.

Several students exploited the pamphlet's potential for creativity and personal relevance. One example is 'Jane', the Student's Union's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans officer, who wanted to use the task in order to find out more about the situation and needs of trans students in order to represent them more effectively. Although the link to religion was not immediately obvious, it would have been a shame to deny her this opportunity of making the task relevant to her life. She managed to bring religion into her discussion by referring to the presence of strong religious societies within the Student's Union who might have negative attitudes towards trans people because of religious teachings on norms of humanity. "This pamphlet then, is an attempt to explore what 'trans' means, look at some of the difficulties faced by trans students, the special welfare they need, what the union has in place to help trans students, and what religion actually has to say about being trans." This pamphlet in particular demonstrated clearly that students' work could be published and disseminated as 'real' briefing papers. There is room for future developments.

Another student, 'Daniel' used the pamphlet to address personal issues around male violence and the response of Christian institutions. Although the work fulfilled the criteria of

a balanced, informative source well, it was clear from personal communication and from Learning Journal entries that the student had a personal need for engagement with this topic. "This paper outlines the Church's complicity in male violence, both through its lack of action and through the theology that it teaches." This pamphlet could well be used by Christian community groups and officials who want to address male violence among their members.

However, there were several recurring issues that revealed the need for further support and improvements of the task. The first challenge was for many students to understand the difference between an academic essay and a source of information. This can be addressed in discussion when the task is introduced to students. Linked to this problem seems to be students' difficulties in providing balanced information rather than taking a particular view. I feel that the name 'pamphlet' in itself might have created a wrong impression. Although some students have written highly original pamphlets, many others have recycled essays written for a course on women in Islamic societies. The course team will put mechanisms into place that prevent this in the future.

Finally, marking of the task was made difficult by the inappropriateness of some of the criteria on the standard assessment form issued by the School to be used for all written coursework. Although the university encourages the introduction of innovative assessment methods, processes for marking are not flexible enough to allow for task-specific criteria to be applied in a transparent manner. Hopefully, this problem can be raised with the appropriate personnel.

Learning Journal

The core of the learning, teaching and assessment strategy is the Learning Journal which contributes 30% to the portfolio mark. After students responded with a lot of anxiety and uncertainty to this unfamiliar task in previous years, the course team decided to give formative feedback in week 3. This had the twin benefits of letting students know early on whether they were on the right track, and it also engaged them in conscious reflection on the learning process in dialogue with the lecturer. Also in response to previous students' concerns, it was decided to provide a tighter structure to the journal by means of guiding questions that students were meant to address in each entry. After generally reflecting on their learning, they were asked to discuss the possible impact of their personal and educational background on their learning. Finally, students were asked to relate the theories they had encountered to real life problems. These three areas of focus were meant to be addressed each week in relation to the lectures and seminars.

The Learning Journal also consisted of two confidence logs called the 'Before & After the course' questionnaires which encouraged students to identify why they were taking this course, what they had achieved and how it linked to their other studies. The questions tried to tease out intellectual as well as emotional responses to the course topics and the format of delivery. I also introduced for the first time a specific questionnaire dealing with 'Constructivist epistemology, objectivity and religion. In previous years, very few students engaged with this topic although it was discussed as a foundation of feminist thinking in week 3. Although the quality of students' answers to the questionnaire differed widely according to their general levels of understanding and analytical skills, they all began to work through epistemological problems that underlie their disciplines and the pedagogical concept of the course. Experiential learning of constructivist epistemology as practiced in the Learning Journal was thus taken to another level through individual theoretical reflection. In order to challenge students' preconceptions about legitimate sources of learning, the guidelines emphasised the need to integrate personal experience, and discussions within and outside the classroom into their journal reflection. This was meant to supplement the discussion of the course readings and the lecturer's input.

The Learning Journal addresses all four pedagogical aims of the course. It encourages students to reflect on and practice constructivist epistemology, it prompts them to link knowledge and experience, it helps them to identify real life problems as learning situations, and as a task it challenges hegemonic classroom structures.

Overall, the achievements have far outweighed the challenges for this cohort and in previous years. The main achievement was a quantifiable development of students' thought over the duration of the course. Even academically weaker students have achieved a high level of metacognitive awareness. This was supported by the current amended structure of the Learning Journal. The experience of previous years had shown that second-year students need prompts to engage in reflection on their learning process. Most students managed to connect their learning with real life, their own lives and those of others in a constructive and often transformative manner. In connection to this, many Learning Journals bear witness to a developing empathy for other perspectives which were often remote from students' own experience. Again, the current amended structure of the task encouraged students to construct other perspectives for comparison. Finally, a main achievement of the Learning Journals is that they provide excellent feedback for the lecturer on the effectiveness and quality of different aspects of the course. Although the volume is enormous even with 30 students, reading through the Learning Journals provides the feedback a lecturer will not be able to elicit in classroom discussions or institutional course evaluations. In this respect, the Reading Log provides very useful feedback on the quality of the course readings, too.

The biggest challenge for students was to keep up with the weekly entries. This was not only a time management issue. It also became apparent as a problem when some students wanted to join the course late and when others had periods of absence during the semester. More proactive mechanisms are needed to deal with these recurring situations. Another major challenge was the integration of classroom discussions into the Learning Journals. Very few students took this requirement seriously in spite of repeated prompts by the lecturer. This shows the limits of students' willingness to challenge hegemonic classroom structures. It seems that they did not take the practical steps of adding detailed notes of peer contributions to their lecture notes in order to reflect on them in their Learning Journals. This raises a crucial question for this kind of pedagogy: is it unrealistic to expect that students are prepared to change their learned attitude towards validation of the 'right' knowledge within institutions that are founded on this attitude. Even when they can expect a reward for their subversiveness, students seem to need more support than what this course is currently offering. I am not sure yet what this should consist of.

Another challenge was generally successfully tackled with additional support in the form of supplementary written guidance. It became clear when students handed in the first weeks' entries for formative assessment, that many had misunderstood the requirement to reflect on the impact of their background on their learning. They should have asked questions like: 'Was I more interested in the lecture on masculinities because I am male?'. Instead the majority had turned the question around and asked: 'Has the study of masculinities transformed me as a male?' This very interesting pattern was integrated into the lecture on standpoint theories and thus provided an excellent real life problem. When practice was thus combined with theory most students understood what was asked of them and why. I think I will hold back the additional guidance from the next student cohort to see whether the same thing happens. Learning from mistakes might have a more lasting effect than withholding the opportunity for students to work through standpoint theory in their own writing.

Finally, two practical challenges need to be mentioned. The incompatibility of standard marking criteria arose here again as it did for the Pamphlet. Also, students and markers struggled with the sheer weight and cost of documents of 200 pages handed in in duplicate. To make the task more environmentally and economically sustainable, facilities

for electronic submission are already in preparation. Of course, this does not shorten the time taken for marking, but it saves the markers' backs. The use of Learning Journals might be limited to small groups, but where they can be used, the benefits are very tangible. Students who participated in this study reported that although their enjoyment of the task was generally low, they considered it to have big benefits for their learning, their critical thinking skills, and their study skills in preparation for their third-year dissertation.

I would like to give you a small insight into the wonderful world of the students' thought by quoting from four Learning Journals. The first example shows how 'Darren' struggled with the task at first in spite of being academically very strong. His final submission achieved 85% after a poor start that might not have gained more than a pass mark. I gave him the following feedback on his first submission at the beginning of the course: "Your discussions are on the whole rather superficial and short, but there are hints that you are not writing everything down that is going through your mind. ... You write that 'as students we aren't particularly capable of giving a full and detailed explanation of what we've learned'. However, I would like to encourage you to experiment more and accept that your thoughts (on paper) might be provisional and muddled." My comments on his final submission at the end of the semester are rather different: "Deep knowledge of the subject area brought to bear on new learning. Highly independent approach. Main strength is making insightful links across material and courses. Drawing on a wide range of sources inside and outside the classroom in a highly analytical manner."

How students connected their learning with their lives is clearly demonstrated by this entry in one of the weaker Learning Journals. The final mark was only in the C range, in contrast to the majority achieving an A or B. 'Karen' reflected critically on the possible impact of her own experiences as a white person upon her response to African-American women's theology. "I do not feel entirely comfortable with the Womanist theology ... I feel it may have an undertone of racism. It may be true that mainstream feminism only concentrates on white middle-class concerns but Womanist theology just does the same for black women. ... Demonising white people does not help matters. ... I do not understand why people are determined to make issues of race, whether it be white racists or black racists. ... Maybe I feel strongly about this as on my estate we are the only fully white family and in the past we have suffered from comments such as 'white trash'. ... However, this should never justify me becoming racist as you have to understand that one person behaving badly in such a manner does not represent the whole race."

I have already quoted from 'Daniel's pamphlet on male violence. He gave a very poetic and passionate resume of what he got out of writing his Learning Journal and out of the course as a whole. "Completing this task has been a love affair. ... More often it has gripped me from within, driving me to places I have not always wanted to go. ... In reading this week for my pamphlet, I have found healing, forgiveness and redemption. It has been difficult to unwind and delineate a lot of my past attitudes, particularly at an emotional level. ... Because of [my own] struggles I am left wondering: does feminism have it right? Is liberation and empowerment really what people seek? ... Does [feminism] fail to deal with human insecurity, as it has failed to deal with mine? Is the heart of the matter neither found in the echelons of power, nor seen in the hope for freedom, but broken in the travesty and beauty of love?"

Finally, I want to present a highly original format of journal entries, that allowed 'Heather' to discuss perspectives and positions remote from her own and helped her to combine theory and real life. She decided to take on the role of Agony Aunt and responded to fictitious letters which she placed at the beginning of her entries. Most of the fictitious scenarios were not introduced by any of the course materials, but are her own inventions. "Dear Heather, I am a Jewish woman and I have been beaten up by my husband for years. However, I know that to get a divorce I would have to go through the religious courts. However, despite the traumas which will continue if I stay with my husband I feel extremely

wary about presenting my case at a religious court as I know I would feel intimidated by the men who run these courts and that they are likely to side with my husband. I really don't know what to do for the best. Thanks, Sara Bier.”

Conclusion

The evidence of students' work shows that the current structure of the Learning Journal provides the right prompts to support students' practice of constructivist epistemology and gives them the opportunity to reflect on it. The Learning Journal also seems to help students to link knowledge and experience. There is still room for developing the Pamphlet task to involve some element of 'fieldwork' for the students to get real experience of their chosen subject matter. Although the Pamphlet seems to provide the right format for students to use real life situations as learning situations, students seemed to be reluctant to come up with their own examples in their Learning Journals and to analyse them critically with the help of theory. The lectures should provide more examples for students to practice.

By far the least progress has been made in supporting students to challenge hegemonic classroom structures. There was very little cohesion in this student group even by the end of the semester. I feel that this did not help students to validate the outcomes of peer learning activities. But I do not think that this is the main reason why they have been reluctant to give peer learning as much credibility as what was stimulated by the lecturer and the readings. It seems that the course team's intention of empowering students as knowledge creators and their own intention at learning the 'right things' in order to progress have not fully come together. It worked as far as the Learning Journals and Pamphlets were concerned. But it failed for the Student-led Discussions and other classroom discussions. What validation mechanism could be introduced to address this issue? It would defeat the object if the lecturer was to validate the outcomes of peer learning. But there might be ways of developing an open and participatory mechanism that satisfied both students and the lecturer.

On the whole, students have commented very favourably on their achievements on the course. Many have found the workload very taxing, but felt that they have made much progress in their understanding of the connections between religion, culture and gender as well as in their ability to analyse theories and debates, and in the development of their study skills. It might be interesting to ask the next cohort whether their attitudes and values have changed significantly by the end of the course or whether previously held convictions have been confirmed and developed. Ultimately, this is what a pedagogy of advocacy is trying to achieve.

Questions raised

This leads to two wider questions that this course review has raised: First, what are the ethical problems with pedagogies of advocacy? Can we raise awareness without indoctrination? Or do we ultimately want to indoctrinate because we are convinced of the validity of a certain position? How do we assess students who disagree with this position? And what support do we give students in a transformation process prompted by our courses? 'Daniel's example shows that this might not only be an intellectual transformation, but also a personal one involving emotions. Should this simply be referred to the university's counselling service or the chaplain? How much should the lecturer as marker get involved?

Secondly, how does a pedagogical approach based on constructivist epistemology sit with disciplines, lecturers and students who believe in universal truth claims? This is not only an issue for ESD and feminist pedagogy, and it is a valid question in the sciences as well as in the humanities. Constructivism is at the heart of currently dominant pedagogies of

student-centred learning. This might not be generally apparent, but it becomes very apparent as soon as reflection on the learning process is emphasised.

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